



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Distribution

August 1, 2011

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JAPANESE NATIONAL PLEADS GUILTY TO SMUGGLING TURTLES AND TORTOISES FROM JAPAN INTO THE UNITED STATES

LOS ANGELES – A Japanese national pleaded guilty this afternoon to a federal smuggling offense for illegally bringing into the United States a shipment of 55 live turtles and tortoises that were concealed in snack food boxes discovered in a suitcase at Los Angeles International Airport.

Atsushi Yamagami, 39, who is believed to reside in Osaka, Japan, pleaded guilty to one felony count of smuggling before United States District Judge George H. King. Yamagami is scheduled to be sentenced by Judge King on October 31. At sentencing, he faces a statutory maximum penalty of 20 years in federal prison.

A second man involved in the smuggling operation – Norihide Ushirozako, 49, also a Japanese citizen believed to reside in Osaka – is scheduled to be sentenced tomorrow. Ushirozako pleaded guilty to a smuggling charge on May 23 for carrying the 55 reptiles discovered at LAX in January.

Yamagami and Ushirozako have been held without bond since their arrests in January.

The case against Yamagami and Ushirozako is the result of an undercover investigation by U.S. Fish and Wildlife agents. In July 2010, agents infiltrated the smuggling ring and purchased approximately 10 protected turtles and tortoises from a person linked to Yamagami. The turtles and tortoises purchased in the undercover operation were all species protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an international treaty that protects species being

threatened by international trade. Species protected under CITES can be legally traded only if the exporting country issues a permit.

In August 2010, Hiroki Uetsuki, an associate of Yamagami, traveled from Osaka, Japan and arrived at Honolulu International Airport. Customs and Border Protection Officers discovered approximately 42 CITES-protected turtles and tortoises hidden in Uetsuki's checked luggage. After U.S. Fish and Wildlife agents arrested Uetsuki, he informed the agents that Yamagami paid him approximately 100,000 yen (approximately \$1,200) and his travel expenses to smuggle turtles and tortoises into the United States. Uetsuki pleaded guilty in federal court in Hawaii to a smuggling charge.

Operation Flying Turtle was conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which received substantial assistance from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

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